

Coffee in the Desert and Other Lessons on Hospitality

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October 13, 2002

Reading

from *Arabian Sands* by Wilfred Thesiger

[One day] an old man came into our camp. He was limping, and even by Bedu standards he looked poor. He wore a torn loincloth, thin and grey with age, and carried an ancient rifle ... In his belt were two full and six empty cartridge-cases, and a dagger in a broken sheath. The Rashid [the tribe that traveled with me] pressed forward to greet him: "Welcome, Bakhit. Long life to you, uncle. Welcome -- welcome a hundred times." I wondered at the warmth of their greetings. The old man lowered himself upon the rug they had spread for him, and ate the dates they set before him, while they hurried to blow up the fire and to make coffee. He had rheumy eyes, a long nose, and a thatch of grey hair. The skin sagged in folds over the cavity of his stomach. I thought, "He looks a proper old beggar. I bet he asks for something." Later in the evening he did and I gave him five *riyals* [the coin of the region], but by then I had changed my opinion. Bin Kabina [my traveling companion] said to me: "He is of the Bait Imani and famous." I asked, "What for?" and he answered, "His generosity." I said, "I should not have thought he owned anything to be generous with," and bin Kabina said, "He hasn't now. He hasn't got a single camel. He hasn't even got a wife. His son, a fine boy, was killed two years ago ... Once he was one of the richest men in the tribe, now he has nothing except a few goats." I asked: "What happened to his camels? Did raiders take them, or did they die of disease?" and bin Kabina answered, "No. His generosity ruined him. No one ever came to his tents but he killed a camel to feed them. By God, he is generous!" I could hear the envy in his voice. (E.P. Dutton and Company Inc., New York, 1959, pp.56- 57.)

Sermon

A few years ago my husband and I traveled to Abu Dhabi, where my husband's father worked for a couple of years. It was a land where, only 50 years before, many of the people had been nomadic and where the culture and history was dominated by the values and traditions that had developed during the centuries of Bedouin living. Wandering with camels and tents from watering hole to watering hole, these Bedouin people had survived under what are arguably the harshest of living conditions.

One of the most central and age-old virtues among the Bedouin is that of hospitality. According to Bedouin tradition, no man can be turned away from your tent. When a stranger arrives, be he friend or foe, you must welcome him in, treat him like a guest of honor, feed and house him for three days, and never ask him where he is going or even

his name, unless he himself offers the information. Indeed, the moment a guest arrives, you are to put on a pot of coffee, and so universal and central is this act that the coffee pot it is served from, called a *dellah*, is synonymous with hospitality. One city in the United Arab Emirates even had a huge *dellah* as a sculpture at its town center to symbolize its welcoming posture towards visitors.

The potential cost of this generous mandate can be great, as illustrated by the story Thesiger tells in his *Arabian Sands*. An old man, once wealthy, finds himself destitute for having lived this ethic of hospitality to the end, slaughtering his most prized possession, his camels, as the final sacrifice to this ideal, *and* he is revered for it.

The mandate to welcome the stranger in Bedouin culture came out of the belief that the only way to survive in the desert was to know you could trust in others to take care of you if you found yourself starving and thirsty. Time had proven that in this harsh climate, a radical interdependency was the only way to survive.

The same ethic of hospitality reappears in Hebrew scriptures. Indeed, the early Israelites lived in a world steeped in the influence of Bedouin culture, and so this notion of hospitality was borrowed. It fit well in part because the Israelites, like the Bedouin, lived in a loose and nomadic tribal framework and in an arid landscape. But there was also a new twist to the stories the Israelites would tell about welcoming strangers.

A perfect example is in Genesis in Chapter 18, a story from the life of Abraham. In the story, the patriarch, who is shown to be the embodiment of all that is virtuous, rushes out to meet three men who arrive outside his tent. He treats them like royalty, inviting them to sit under the shade of trees, bringing them water to drink, washing their feet, and offers to bring them bread that they might refresh themselves. They accept his offer, so Abraham orders his wife, Sarah, to bake bread, and he takes a tender calf and slays it and offers the three strangers a full banquet.

When the guests have eaten, they do something strange -- they give Abraham a message. It is the promise that his wife shall bear a son. The only problem with this news is that at the time of this story, Abraham and Sarah are very old and have never yet been able to bear a child. So absurd are their words that Sarah, overhearing them from inside the tent, laughs out loud. And then a voice booms out (the kind of voice you learn to fear in the Hebrew scriptures) and it reprimands her, saying: "Is anything too wonderful for the Lord." It is at this moment that Abraham and Sarah realize these were not ordinary guests. And of course, Sarah does go on to bear a son.

In Ovid's telling of the myth of Philemon and Baucis, we see the same twist. Perhaps because they no longer needed to welcome guests for their own survival, like the nomads of the empty quarter, the men and women of Israel and Greece find another justification for maintaining this ethic of hospitality -- because God (or those bearing God's blessings) may come disguised as strangers. It is a notion that carries over into Christianity, too. Indeed, Jesus himself comes back as a stranger when he feasts with the disciples in Emmaus, only revealing himself as the risen Christ partway through the meal.

The message of stranger as God in disguise is repeated in many cultures. In India, where the generosity between host and guest is also stressed, there is a saying: "A guest is like a god."

Indeed, the very roots of the word "guest" tell of how deeply rooted our notion of hospitality is in the mix of the stranger with the divine.

Sue Simek, who studied linguistics, is to be credited for this incredible sleuthing. It turns out that the root of the word "guest" is the Indo-European word *ghostis*, which meant "strange." The word that gave rise to the words "hospitality," "hospital," "hospice" and "host" -- words that involve the idea of caring and nurturing for the stranger. So too did this root give rise to words that connected the idea of stranger to that of enemy -- words like "hostile" and "hostility" and "hostage." But most interesting of all is that the word *ghostis*, which is the root of the word "guest," is also the root of the word "ghost," which in Old English meant "soul," "spirit," "life," "breath." In other words, the stranger who was the guest was also the embodiment of soul, of spirit, of life. To use a biblical phrase: To entertain guests was to entertain angels unaware.

It was a powerful punch to deliver the age-old ethic that might no longer be needed for one's own survival. Now the incentive was also that you might welcome Jesus, or Krishna, or God herself when you let in the beggar and treated him or her like a king or queen. And this was the inspiration for living in a way that created a kind of numinous reciprocity in the world.

Any who have traveled in foreign lands know that this generosity of spirit toward the stranger is priceless. When I traveled in Turkey, the rumor was that it was dangerous for single women. Indeed, my two female traveling companions and I had our share of harassment, but just as often we were treated with incredible care. I cannot tell you how often we were escorted to our destination by strangers. Being the suspicious American, I kept waiting for the hook (Did they want money or a date?), but having made sure we'd found where we were going (gotten our bus ticket, secured a room for the night), our guide would simply shake our hands or bow and say goodbye. Indeed, it turns out that being welcoming to the stranger was and is part of the Turkish national identity.

It is something you never forget when you are vulnerable and someone not only doesn't take advantage of your vulnerability, but rather sees you safely home. It is a generous and selfless love they show for you and it is never forgotten.

Having experienced that kind of care is part of what motivates me to want to live out this ethic of hospitality. However, there is something else that also motivates my desire to welcome others. It also came out of an experience, but a much less positive one.

Years ago, when I served as the minister of the Universalist National Memorial Church in Washington, D.C., I saw a woman during the coffee hour who was standing alone. She was bravely sipping her coffee as she stood around and waited for someone to say hello. Seeing her, I tried to make it across the room to introduce myself, but like a bad dream,

every time I walked three feet, someone insisted that I talk to them for "just one minute" about something important, and I made painfully slow progress toward her. When I finally made it to where she had been standing, she was gone. I looked around, but she had left.

I ran up the stairs and out the front door of the church looking for her, and caught her just as she was leaving. I apologized, belatedly welcomed her and introduced myself. At first she was civil, but cold, as her feelings had clearly been hurt. However, we continued talking, and after a while she told me her story. She said she had just moved to the city to take a job, having spent the last year in North Carolina, and in that last year she had nursed her partner of many years through a painful struggle with and eventual death from ovarian cancer. This trip to church was her first attempt, after many weeks alone in the apartment, to reach out and find the community she so desperately needed in her life. She cried as she told me this, and I cried, too. We cried not only at what she had endured, at the incredible loss she had suffered, and the hard transitions in her life, but at the hurt that had been compounded when she came to church. That day, that moment, I vowed to do my best to put the visitor and the stranger first and to invite any congregation I served to do the same.

The majority of people make the decision to return to a religious community within the first five minutes of walking into the building! That means that what is important to them is not the minister (whom they haven't met) or the music (which they haven't much heard) or any of the church's incredible programs (which they know nothing about), but the *spirit* of the place. And how do they know the spirit so quickly?

Well, a few years back, a woman decided to rate churches she visited on how they welcomed her. For her own part, she did what she could to invite attention. She sat in the front pew, she went to coffee hour, and she walked slowly as she went through her morning at church, smiling at everyone she met. The congregation got 10 points every time another worshipper smiled or greeted her. They got 100 points if someone exchanged names with her, 200 points if they invited her to coffee, 200 points for an invitation to return, 1,000 points for an introduction to another person and 1,000 points for an invitation to meet the minister.

According to this scale, in her visits, 11 out of 18 churches earned less than 100 points! Five churches received less than 20 points (that means less than two people smiled or greeted her -- a woman smiling at people all her way through coffee hour). If you want to know what it is that people sense in the first five minutes they walk into a place, imagine that no one smiles, or says hello, or introduces themselves, and the spirit of the place is clear.

It isn't enough for us to call ourselves a welcoming congregation because we pledge to welcome people who are gay or lesbian or transgender. The real work of welcoming is much broader. It requires putting ourselves in another's shoes. A truly welcoming congregation, as Martin Buber might say, is about I-thou relationships. It is about seeing ourselves in the stranger and reaching out.

I know sometimes it can be hard. You know the joke: "How can tell a Scottish extrovert? He looks up from his shoes." Well, some of us, I know, are Scottish extroverts -- we feel shy or awkward. Some of us want to catch up with friends. But we have to get over our own shyness and delay catching up with friends because something more important is required of us.

I asked Jeanette Oishi, who is a one-woman welcoming marvel, for her tips on how to welcome folks. I've put copies on the Membership table this morning for those who consider themselves welcoming-impaired (we can admit that among friends). They're pretty simple. And let me just tell you, if you are afraid to embarrass yourself, that I regularly "welcome" long-time members. In fact, in one church I served, in a single Sunday morning, I "welcomed" three founding members of the congregation. It was embarrassing, but embarrassing in service to a larger good. So embarrass yourself if you have to!

The fact is, I want that woman who counts smiles to come to our church and lose count. I want the man who nursed his wife to her death who comes to church to know *immediately* he is not alone, but welcome to mourn and heal here. I want the young girl who is leaving behind the faith of her family, who is pregnant or beaten down or lost, to know she is safe and cared for here and to know that *immediately*. I want Unitarian Universalists from other cities or towns to go home and talk about how they were taken in *like family* when they visited the Summit church. I want people who were hoping for anonymity to be *hopelessly disappointed* when they visit us, so eager are we to greet and get to know them. I want love to be manifest from the moment you or I or anyone else walks through our doors.

So, let us all give ourselves a challenge. If you are a Scottish extrovert, look up from your shoes a bit more often. Let us see how many points we can score at coffee hour or before a Sunday morning service. Every week, introduce yourselves to one person you don't know, *and then* introduce them to someone you do already know.

In general, let us just vow to invite the stranger into our lives and see what blessings he or she offers in return. The stories of antiquity say that what is offered back to us can be quite extraordinary, and experience would bear that out.

So may it be. I love you all. Welcome. Coffee's on in the tent downstairs.